

MUTSUYO OKUMURA

Notes on Translation

KAIWIKI (JAPANESE) WOMEN'S CLUB

Except for the last two entries in December 1941, the notes and minutes do not look like they were written by Shige. The record is not complete; some entries are missing. The club was originally an informal gathering, but the Reverend who arrived later suggested to the members that they make it formal and buy a notebook to keep records. He must have foreseen investigations by the local authorities. Neither the club's name nor the club's rules mention Japan, but its address was at a Japanese Buddhist temple, and the club ran a Sunday school for (presumably) Japanese children. It is noteworthy that Shige was not interned despite the fact that she headed a Japanese organization. It is not known if the notebook was ever inspected by the authorities.

DRAFTS OF THE LETTERS

Juliet's grandmother, Ōshita Shige, brings to mind my own grandmother. Although they led very different lives, they were born about the same time and in the same area of Japan. With her father's support, Shige went to a girls' high school in Hiroshima and was sent to Hawai'i, while my grandmother got her higher education by helping proofread my grandfather's writings (he was a journalist/author, among other things). My grandmother never left Japan, yet her handwriting and Shige's show a lot of similarities. Even after 30 years away from Japan, Shige demonstrated skill in writing letters in Japanese. It is hard to believe that what she left us are only drafts.

It was an irony that Shige's father prepared his daughter, who

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he eventually gave away to a Japanese immigrant man abroad, by giving her a good education—at that time, high school graduates were considered (and considered themselves) to be intellectual but versed mostly in things Japanese. Shige may have been prepared to be a “good wife,” but she was not prepared to live as a farmer in a foreign country. She must have felt both lonely and alienated in rural Hawai‘i. It is another irony that, just when she finally found peace and happiness as the president of the Kaiwiki (Japanese) Women’s Club, war broke out between Japan and the United States. The final irony was that she found herself lucky to be in Hawai‘i during and after the War. Most Japanese in Hawai‘i were treated quite well, had plenty of food, and were even better off than before, as she describes in one of her letters to Japan.

As one would expect, her letters are rather formal and follow letter writing conventions. Occasionally, though, large or sloppy handwriting reveals overwhelming emotions. Reading her letters moved me greatly. It was as if she had come alive. In her third letter, to a relative on O‘ahu, she is a strong-willed woman who has the courage to write, “It is not enough to just bite at the throats of those who dropped the atomic bomb,” even though she must have known that her letter could have been censored. But her fifth letter (second to Japan in the notebook), starts with poetic descriptions of her life in Hawai‘i. She must have been a lover of Japanese classics written many centuries ago by female authors, for here she is a sentimental woman. She was writing in midsummer, the anniversary of Japan’s surrender. The letters also portray a religious woman in the Buddhist sense. Her activities included listening to priests’ sermons, helping people in distress, and being an active member of the temple’s women’s club. By the time she received news from Japan six years after the War broke out and more than a year after the end of the War, some of her relatives and friends had died of the atomic bomb, air raids, lack of medical care, and old age. She misses them and shows sympathy toward those who are left behind, but at the same time accepts the deaths as inevitable.